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The Minstrel

Redeemer University College's
Poetry and Fiction Magazine



Volume 16, Winter 2006

The Minstrel

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Fill your paper with the breathings of your heart. ~ William Wordsworth

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Forest Finery

I stand serene, silent, surrounded.
Wrinkled fingers against a sheet of sky,
Stretch upwards, crooked, from corner to corner,
Envelope, encircle, encompass

Me.

Single strands of hairs, soiled and estranged,
Are captured by the fresh whisper of the wind.
They shiver, they tremble, and they shake.
They yearn for release, and long to be
Home.

A broken burrow no longer a sanctuary,
No longer a dwelling but a corpse
Laid to rest, seeping, and kissing
The layer that crunches in the fresh
Oasis.

A beam slowly falling that glows and peeks
Through the web for a path to illuminate, to dazzle,
To radiate its glory and to kiss
One who is still standing and listening for
Paradise.

Amy Klumpenhower

Death by Invitation

the post-girl came and dropped
an invitation in his mailbox
that he rescued after work
long after she had walked away
and he sat down on his front porch
with his finger as a knife
to slice the flap glued shut by spit
no sender's name, no post reply
a formal card in black and white
(the paper black, the words in white)
oh God, tonight at 10 o'clock
was barely five hours away
so much to do, so little time
to call his parents, kiss his girlfriend
buy a new suit, say a prayer
and wrap his car around a tree

Caroline Bulk

A Man for All Seasons

Wouldn't you know it—in come
the clouds, this storm brewing
in our minds. Grey-scale shaded
sheets blanket the wet, tired earth;
pressure builds like a weight on these
pounding atrophied muscles of ours.

Summer comes and the sun's so
sweltering we swoon in its heat.
Skin burns and its paltry hue
reddens; amid the sandy sauna
below the glistening sphere the
masses congregate for worship.

The days fade and the winds
change, as do demeanor and clothing.
School starts and the bell blows
students through the hallways,
as unique and similar
as the mottled fall of shuffling leaves.

When all crowns are cast and
exuberance is dead—the earth steels
itself with frost. Flakes of shimmering
snow descend like manna, hiding all
that is lost. We hope, hallow, hibernate—
silently seeking the spring of the sun.

Marijke Lammers

Always There

From the fire of a sunset
To the smoke of burned out hearts
In the cages of addiction
To the freedom of God's people
From the scent of fine perfume
To the stench of a beggar's rags
God is there, always there.

Adam Wilson

Betty's Place

It was five o'clock and George was right on time. The autumn leaves crunched beneath the crown of his cane as he strolled on the pathway. In one hand he held an old photo album, which he tucked beneath the crook of his arm. His other wrinkled hand clung tightly to the cane in front of him, carefully maneuvering its tip through the leaves. His white hair stuck out beneath the old farmer's hat, like strands of straw ready to be blown away by the wind. George pulled his jacket tighter around his black and blue flannel shirt. He took a deep breath of the invigorating fall air, and felt comforted by the beauty of it. He stopped momentarily, and lifted his face to the trees surrounding him. Fall was his favourite time of year, Anna's too. What was it that she'd always said about the fall time? The corners of George's mouth turned slightly into a soft smile, and he chuckled. Anna had always marveled at the beauty around her, inviting him to share in her excitement. She always mentioned how the world could have been created such that as soon as fall came the leaves would just fall off, brown and dried up, and then winter would arrive. But instead God chose to bring incredible beauty to behold in each tree, in each leaf before the winter, before the darkness and coldness set in. And now, even though George's eyes weren't as they used to be, he could still after all those years picture the beauty that surrounded him.

He could see the familiar coffee shop in the distance. It was the coffee shop in the small town in which George lived, the place he felt compelled to be in at this time. As he came closer to the shop he looked with disappointment at the front of the building. He could make out the bright letters of "Betty's Place" but they looked different from before. It was a new sign he didn't recognize. It must have been so long since he had last come here, George couldn't remember exactly how long. Time went by too fast.

He reached the front doors and leaned the weight of his body on the cane. He lifted his wrinkled hand to the door handle and grunted as he opened the door wide, just enough to allow his frail body to fit through. He could smell the aroma of coffee, and it made his stomach rumble in response. The tables were all placed neatly, and their surfaces shined with cleanliness. Each napkin holder was perfectly aligned in the middle of each table, to look as though no one had eaten there before. The coffee shop looked the same inside to George as it always did, the smell and feeling of it bringing recognition and comfort.

George decided on the broccoli soup special – it had been such a long time since he had tasted a good bowl of soup. He pushed his hand deep into his pocket, pulling out a wrinkled bill and stood in the line. He grunted as he continually shifted the weight of his body from one foot to the other. His age had come upon him so quickly; it felt like only yesterday he was a tall young man. He reached the counter and was greeted with a friendly smile.

"Hi George. It's good to see you today, how are you feeling?"

"Fine, thanks." He frowned for a moment. The woman's face looked familiar, yet he couldn't remember why. How was it that she knew his name?

"Will it be the usual today, George? We just made a fresh pot of broccoli soup, it's your favourite."

"Yes, that would be fine. It's been a long time since I've had a good hearty meal such as that."

The woman just smiled sweetly. "I'm sure you'll enjoy it, George. Here, why don't you just have yourself a seat in your bench, and I'll bring over your meal."

George smiled and clutched his cane. He took slow, sure steps towards the tables, the album tucked underneath his arm. He opened the door to the enclosed smoking section and made his way to the corner bench. He sat down slowly, the cushion of the bench forming to his body. George wasn't one to smoke, and neither was Anna, but this was their bench, the one they had always chosen. He leaned his head back and sighed. He could picture young Anna sitting across from him as though it were yesterday, her sweet smile warming his heart, and her laughter ringing throughout the coffee shop.

He could almost feel her soft fingers running over his hands and he reached out to grab a hold of them, to cover them with his own. His fingers only grasped the air surrounding him, feeling empty and out of place, until the feeling of the soup soaking his skin awakened the reality within him.

George jerked back his hand and covered it with the napkin in front of him. He wondered how the soup had gotten there, or maybe he had placed it there himself, he didn't know. But he was sure he had ordered the sandwich deal...perhaps he should tell that lady over there that she'd made a mistake. He wasn't in the mood for broccoli soup; he just had that yesterday. He pushed the soup aside and reached for the coffee instead. With one hand he sipped at the soothing drink, and with the other he opened the cover of the photo album. Loose pictures and cuttings fell out as George turned the pages, and he grunted in frustration. It was all so disorganized, maybe it was finally time to put the pictures all in order and arrange them neatly. George picked up the photos and spread them over the surface of the table, stopping a moment to rest his eyes upon each one. They all held such special memories for him.

He felt hungry. It was strange that Anna had neglected to make supper tonight. She must have just stepped outside for a moment to talk to the neighbours. George noticed the plant hanging at the far end of the room. It looked dry and dusty. What day was today? Maybe Anna had forgotten to water them yesterday. He smiled. He could tell lately how her age was coming upon her, how she was forgetting small things. But he didn't mind, he would water the plants now, and tell her later on. He grabbed the cup of water in front of him and made his way to the plants. He was amazed at how dry the soil was – just how long had it been since Anna had watered these? He brushed the dust off the leaves with his fingers, leaving each one shining again. Maybe he would have to start reminding Anna now to water them; it seemed she had forgotten for a few weeks.

George could hear the familiar voice of his son calling him. He smiled. James must have decided to come home from college for the weekend. Anna would be so happy. She would want to cook him a nice home-cooked meal, and bake an apple pie.

"Dad....Dad... it's James. I just wanted to stop by for a quick visit before the kids are done school. Here, these plants aren't to be watered, they're just decoration. Have a seat."

George raised his face up to the man leading him towards the bench. He frowned. His face looked slightly familiar but George couldn't place it. It didn't matter. He could feel how tired his legs were; they often felt this way after walking the distance to the coffee shop. He allowed his eyes to meet the man in front of him.

"Hi, how are you? I don't believe we've met. I'm George. It's nice to meet you."

The man smiled half-heartedly, and was quiet for a moment before he spoke again. "It's seems that you've been coming here a lot lately. It's getting colder outside, Grace and I could bring you meals at home instead. In fact, why don't I bring you home now on my way to the school."

"Oh no, my house isn't far. Besides, I think Anna, my wife, is out for the night and it's been such a long time since I've come here."

The man in front of him sighed and stood up. "I have to pick up the kids now, but I'll stop by tomorrow. Make sure you get home soon, Dad, it'll get dark."

George glanced outside at the setting sun; it was time to go home. He gathered his loose pictures and placed them back in the album. They were so disorganized; he really should arrange them sometime. He tucked the album underneath his arm and grasped the cane with the other. Grunting, he pulled himself up, and shut his eyes at the sharp pain coursing through his body. It seemed so difficult to get small tasks accomplished lately. As he made his way through the shop he heard the lady at the counter call after him.

"Goodbye George, I'll see you tomorrow."

He smiled and waved. Well, he might come back again tomorrow; maybe Anna would like to go sometime for a coffee.

George stepped outside and made his way to the pathway. His old work boots made soft crunching noises as they wandered through the maze of autumn leaves. He pulled a napkin from his pocket and blew into it, scrunched it up, and placed it back in his pocket. The weather really was getting colder. George wondered what day it was; it felt like winter was coming upon them soon. He could see the sun setting in the distance. Beauty before the darkness. That's what Anna would say. George walked through the gate and down the familiar path, glancing at the black and red stones. The decaying summer flowers lay bent over, the autumn leaves slowly piling up around them. He stopped when he came to the big black stone at the corner of the path. The rays of the sun seemed to kiss its surface and warm the silk flowers laid on its top. George knelt in front of it, his gnarled fingers tracing Anna's engraved name – a fresh reminder.

George glanced down at the ground, surprised to see that there was still dirt in front of the stone; the summer flowers hadn't been planted yet. George wondered why he hadn't finished planting the flowers yesterday, maybe it had started to rain. Spring weather always seemed to have days and days of rain, unexpected sometimes. He pushed away the leaves and began to spread out the dirt evenly with his hands, crushing the hard clumps, until soft dirt sifted through his fingers. George grasped the curved surface of the stone and pushed his body up. He groaned at the pain that coursed through his body – his age was really catching up to him. He took a step back and smiled. Purple petunias would look nice this year, he'd have to go to the greenhouse tomorrow and pick some up. He should write himself a reminder as soon as he got home.

George clasped his cane and tucked his photo album underneath his other arm. The autumn leaves crunched beneath the crown of his cane as he strolled down the pathway. It was getting dark soon, he'd better hurry home, Anna would be getting worried.

Amy Klumpenhower

4:00 AM

My face has become one
With the computer screen,
My eyes inextricably glued
to its dry surface,
My fingers permanently adhered
To the smooth keys
I look back and see myself
In the reflection
The only noise I know is the rattle
Of the faithful keys
Obediently following the ebb and flow
Of my long-numb fingers
While I strain my mind
Squeeze my withered brain
Wring out the last remains of thoughts
Whetting ideas with thick, warm coffee.

Melissa Kuipers

Returning to Infancy

Their moans rise as a chorus of suckling pigs
clamouring for food
a cage of din and confusion
Off to the side a woman curls up
in her cursing
Across the room a man argues
with the ghost of his wife
Their stench clouds up over their bodies
a blend of urine and moth balls
almost edible in its density
All in their infant state
crying gummy cries –
their dentures got lost in the toilet bowl
Excessive skin rolls over their hands
trying to grip their frail bones

Each is encased in a crystal sphere of dignity
when they arrive
only to have it shattered
by the doors closing behind them

Stephanie Elgersma

Broken Glass

Trista and I were neighbours, our family's farm being just a few miles down the road from where she lived. She got on the bus right after me, and we were in the same grade, so everyday we shared a seat near the front, away from the bigger kids, while we rode quietly down the bumpy dirt road in the brisk grey hours of morning. We usually sat in silence, her soft brown curls bouncing abruptly off her shoulders as the bus bumped down the unmanicured country road. Sometimes she would turn her dark eyes towards the fogged window and sing soft songs, which I could never recognize.

It was always odd to me that Trista lived with her father. In our small town conservative community, it was odd enough that Trista came from what we referred to as a 'broken home.' But even more strangely, Trista and her younger brother lived in the custody of their father, not their mother. It was upon her inviting me to visit their humble abode that our friendship truly began.

I say abode because it would be unfair to call the dwelling their home, since it was not theirs and it was hardly a home. It was not a house, nor an apartment, but rather it was what had always been known as the 'west wing' of her wealthy aunt's house. This house, though seemingly the prison of Trista's father, who had been left nearly penniless by the divorce and was left no other shelter but the incarceration within his sister's benevolence, was another one of the few joys that brought Trista escape from the world. All the children in the town claimed the house hidden in the woods was a mansion, and to Trista it was her castle. Perhaps it was not the house itself, because she could not help but feel the projection of her father's entrapment in the stark rooms of a structure that was not his own. But if she was trapped in this magical place, she was a princess in the upper dungeon of a kingdom in which she could explore as she liked.

The house of mansion or castle was set back out of sight from the small dirt road on the edge of a few hundred acres of wood. This only affirmed the castle dream as the setting fit nicely with a mysterious fairytale motif.

One day early in the quiet, stale summer, Trista invited me over. We sat in the huge basement in over-stuffed couches in front of her aunt's big screen TV and watched movies and ate chips and raw hotdogs out from her father's small fridge upstairs in the west wing. The fridge, I noticed, was full of beer. In fact, there were a few of the brown glass bottles around the small apartment the three of them shared. "Once," she told me, "I searched the whole room and found them under the bed and in the drawers so I lined them all along the windowsill." She said it with a weakness, a sort of intimate regret, the only sign of disappointment I had ever seen in her many colourful description of life. It seemed a child's attempt to communicate her knowledge of a hidden trap.

After we had sat through so many cartoons that our eyes felt dry and our legs felt as flimsy as the wieners we had eaten, she decided that we should go out into the woods. She led me through the large hallways of the house, walked across the safe, bright, grassy lawn and confidently crossed the threshold into the tall, overwhelming forest emanating from the backyard. I continued to lag a few steps behind her lead as we walked in silence together through soft, churned soil along dirt-bike tracks, continually finding walking sticks along the way, each time trading the former for a newer, stronger one. She seemed to always find the best sticks, the straightest and widest, and would strike them quickly against the broad girth of a towering tree to test their strength. We journeyed day-dreaming all the while as the lattice of canopy shadows flashed across our faces. I thought of Hansel and Gretel and

wondered what sort of mystery we may come across as we strolled deeper and deeper into the eerie woods. And yet each time I looked over at her, the woods seemed less eerie because I saw a deep comfort, which seemed to exude from her and grew stronger the longer we walked. She seemed so consoled, so at peace, I could not help but trust her.

Suddenly we came to the edge of a grassy clearing. Light poured in strong through the parted trees. As she wandered into the small meadow, shoulders high, she surveyed her surroundings, not in the way one does upon her first time encountering a new place, but in the way a supervisor scans the area she knows well to ensure that everything is as usual. My eyes followed her gaze and I saw that we were surrounded by abandoned, rusting vehicles of many kinds.

I looked over, surprised that what we had found, to see if we had both happened upon this place. But her face was all confidence, familiarity even, as if she had intended the entire visit only to bring me to this place.

"This is the junkyard," she announced calmly as I looked around in amazement at this archaeological site, surrounded by steel skeletons of ancient automobiles. There had to be over a dozen cars and trucks here, some so old that the original colour was barely discernible. Ivy crept out of the windows and engulfed the outsides. Sycamores grew up against and over the tops of the old beasts, hugging their sides. Most had spider-webbed windshields, missing tires, dented roofs, broken doors.

"This is my favourite place to be," she said in a reverent voice as she walked in a large oval, running her hand gently along the deteriorating bumper of each relic. I watched in awe as she finally completed her circle, and leaned against the flat tire of a tilted pick-up, facing a once-blue Oldsmobile. Then she reached down deftly, grasped a stone the size of her fist, and hurled it at the windshield in front of her. I cringed as a portion of the already-crystallized glass shattered into the car's interior.

"Do you come here often?" I asked after a few minutes of awkward silence, not knowing what else to say. She nodded slowly, respectfully, and found another stone to throw.

I watched her throw a few more stones. One by one she picked them up slowly, cradled them, and then propelled them towards unsuspecting windows. Some would bounce back, some would set a white vein crack through the glass, some would cave in. but every one hit the damaged vehicles, straight on target.

We stood there on the soft, brilliant grass for several moments. A bird landed on a car roof, and sang a solo harmoniously with the chorus of birds in the nearby woods. We stood frozen in the warm centre of the junkyard. I dug my hands deeply into the lint in my pockets. Finally, the bird flew away and she closed its hymn as she sighed deeply with mouth closed. Without looking at me, she turned and walked past me back toward the trail. I followed and skipped a few steps to catch up, hands still lodged in my pockets. As silently as we had come, we walked out the junkyard side by side.

Melissa Kuipers

we once bought a fish

We once bought a fish
you and I
and we watched it swim all afternoon
wondering with childlike amazement
at how it seemed suspended in nothing
It floated like the balloon you won once
that made you laugh as you watched it bob
and swing like the earrings
you wear whenever I pass you by
Those earrings hang in my dreams like dangling apples
the fruit of sin
glaring red as the cherry lipstick
that smothers the lips
you use to kiss and seduce
Two thin, red worms stretched
across a pale, ashen street
A street where I see you
leaning against the barbed wire
that crisscrosses up behind your back
like the nylons following the V of your legs
V for victory
though we both know you're losing
Now it's me watching you swim in your prison
trapped
like the fish we once bought

Stephanie Elgersma

Shadows Play Games at Midnight

The shade of jagged peaks
Casts terror across a moonlit scape
Puffs of smoke hang bewildered
From twisted smoke stacks
And all is well as it seems well

Shadows defeat the climber
He lies silent at the end of an illusion
Freedom held captive by a mirage of impressions.

Shadows play games at midnight

Adam Wilson

Leave Me

Butterflies scream
as you walk out that door.
Shrills and shrieks
ring through my ears.

Empty air
you leave no sound
Closed soft lips
will not expose.

Knotted words
have strangled the touch
Goodbye lover
for this is the end.

Jason Dykstra

Fire And Ice

Working out of town seemed harder these days. The greenhouse shading system he was installing at Steeplebush Farms in Limington had not been cooperating. His employee had pestered him about that wage increase again. The trailer roof was leaking in two places. She hadn't called him all week. It was late Friday afternoon. He had left work early today, hoping to surprise her with an early supper and flowers. Now, as he pulled into his driveway, the overcast clouds billowing overhead unsettled him. The driveway was empty. The garage doors were shut and the front bay windows of the house were completely draped. Not a single ray of light poked through. The place looked deserted. He parked the van.

He entered the house, roses in hand. It was deathly quiet. He paused, then closed the front door softly. His grease-stained hand found the hall light by memory. After untying his worn-out boots, he ran his hands through his sweat-dried hair in front of the mirror and tried smoothing out his disheveled work shirt. Unsatisfied but presentable, he started up the stairs to the kitchen.

They met at the top of the stairs. She had been sleeping. Her hair was twisted and tangled, her face powderless and pale. Her blank eyes seemed unable to meet his gaze. He hugged her close, but her body felt limp. Her body seemed brittle, a mere sliver of her former self. She hadn't hugged back; he knew. He forced a smile and presented the roses. She took them, reluctantly it seemed. His heart pounded. The silence was deafening.

She stepped back towards the kitchen and turned on the light. His gaze followed her, and then fell on the kitchen table. The enormous bouquet of white lilies was unmistakably beautiful. But they weren't his. He wrenched his eyes away from the flowers back towards his wife. Her back was turned; she would not face him.

Over the thunder of his heart, Jack heard the rain. It battered against the bay windows.

Marcel Vander Wier

don't forget

you take those moments you
forget – you
let them die as
sure as the leaves falling
turning to the
death within –
but there He
is much more powerful than
the wind breaking
the life
conquering the shadow
that has clung
to the arm
breaking
the chains of remorse
of pain and
the last
breath, the last cry
he breathed in me a life
with everything i
did not deserve
He shed
the tear for
me, so
i could have hope –
to forget would be to paint
the leaves of
autumn – force
the dying – there's the problem

Caroline Bulk

